

DR. WILLIAM DRENNAN—HIS LIFE IN GEORGIAN IRELAND

by

HUME LOGAN, M.Ch., F.R.C.S.

Consultant Surgeon, The Ulster Hospital, Dundonald

WILLIAM DRENNAN was born in Belfast in 1754, the last of 9 children, only three of whom survived childhood. His father was the Reverend Thomas Drennan, Minister of the First Presbyterian Congregation, Rosemary Street, Belfast and he was a Dissenter throughout his life. William was educated at the school of Belfast in Church Lane which had been in existence for nearly one hundred years when he went there. In 1769 he went to Glasgow University where two years later he obtained his M.A. at the age of seventeen. It is not known how or where he spent the next two years, but in 1773 he went as a medical student to Edinburgh — a university which was popular amongst the Northern Irish at this time, principally because of its excellence, but also because of the low cost of tuition. Dublin University required a student to spend 12 years before obtaining his M.D. and was not favoured by the Ulstermen.

From the time he went to Edinburgh until his death in 1820 he had a fairly constant correspondence with his sister Martha (Matty) McTier of which nearly one thousand five hundred letters are preserved in the Northern Ireland Public Records Office, and provide a unique picture of the life of a doctor in Ireland in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The letters are even more important to historians as Drennan was deeply steeped in politics and a synopsis of many of them was published in 1931.¹

From reading the letters written while he was a medical student one gets the impression that student life has not changed very much in two hundred years. The main difference is that up till 1840 the thesis for the final M.D. had to be written in Latin and the examination was also conducted in that language. However, the role of the Irish medical student remains much the same as Drennan wrote 'A student of medicine is a term of contempt, but an Irish student of medicine is the very



Dr. William Drennan. Detail from an oil painting by Robert Home, December 1786, originally in possession of Mrs. Duffin, Belfast.

Based on a talk given to the Ulster Medical Society, 20th January, 1983.

highest complication of disgrace'. He also wrote of a typical day in Edinburgh as follows:-

'I rise a little after 6 in the morning and am resolved (not with one of my Belfast resolutions) to continue this custom. I strike my flint, blow my tinder and light my match with as much assiduity as John the Painter; and after preparing for my classes, at about 8 o'clock, if it be a good morning I give stretch to my legs for half an hour in the meadow which lies near my lodging — when I return I take my academical breakfast of bread and milk and then issue out to the labours of the day — from 9 till one I am tossed about with the wind of doctrine thro' different parts of the University; from 9 till 10 at the Practice; from 10 till 11 at Chemistry, my second attendance at both; from 11 till 12 at the *Materia Medica* a class which treats of medicine, their nature, use and application — from 12 till one at the Infirmary from which I derive much more benefit than when last time here. Yet still it is a disagreeable place to me and I never enter it without thinking of those lines of Milton 'Despair tended the sick, busiest from couch and over them triumphant death his dart shook, but delayed to strike' — From one until 3, I make it a rule to walk and chew the cud of what I have heard, and either soar to the sublime Calton where as Johnson expressed it, I can see the dusty world look dim below or pace along with my fellow mortals in the meadow or the park — After dinner I have seldom more than an hour's attendance at College and that is on Midwifery from half an hour, after 5 until 7 I am generally in useful and agreeable company, and from that until 10 I read or write — Saturday and Sunday are constant vacation days at College; on these days I make an Epicurean Breakfast of tea and toast, then idle away an hour at a Coffee-House; call on my friends, walk into the country &c, and in the evening have some select friends . . .'

Drennan considered himself a competent Latin scholar and he wrote the thesis for his M.D. in that language. It was titled 'Venesection in the Treatment of Continued Fevers' and was delivered in September 1778 the year in which he graduated.

He returned to Belfast, but little is known of the two years he practiced there, except that he was not very successful, although he received a vote of thanks from the Charitable Society for introducing a scheme of inoculation against small pox into the Charitable Society House in 1782. He also read a paper to the Society in the same year on this subject.

Late in 1782 Drennan moved to Newry, at this time an important town in the southern part of County Down. Its importance was due to the fact that it was a port and was connected to a large hinterland by the Newry Canal, the first part of which was completed in 1742 and was the first major canal in the British Isles. When Drennan lived there it boasted a population of around ten thousand — a figure not very different from that of Belfast. Drennan, still a bachelor lived in rented accommodation with his man servant. The latter gets a prominent place in the correspondence because of his unreliability, drunkenness and gambling. He looked after Drennan's horse (before it was stolen), powdered his wig and dressed his hair, apart from doing many other chores and running errands. Perhaps it was the servant who serviced Drennan's bath for we read 'I have had the fortune of meeting with an excellent bath not one hundred yards from my door . . . It is a large and deep trough

placed in a little garden house, and as convenient as possible for immersing the whole body — I have made use of it 4 or 5 times and I rise between 8 and 9 (which laudible practice I hope to continue) for the sake of getting all over before the necessary business of the day’.

Drennan’s main practice was as an obstetrician although he gives us little insight into this part of his work. However, there were several occasions when he had to be out of Newry for up to seven days for a confinement. He did realise nevertheless, how important it was to be successful in this type of practice as he wrote after twins were safely delivered ‘How fragile is our professional character—had she died at this time, I should not perhaps have one patient more in this line so sensible is the female mind to unfavourable impressions. When any fatal accidents happen—want of good-luck is sufficient’.

Measles, typhus and tuberculosis were common in Newry and there really was little that Drennan could do about these conditions. Typhus was treated in many ways and the logic of their uses is as baffling to us today as it must have been to our colleagues of yesteryear. Emetics, clysters, purging, bleeding, blistering, etc. were all employed and it can only be said that it is fortunate that any patients survived — in fact, those who did not receive any treatment were probably the lucky ones!

Small pox was also common and it was in this field that Drennan probably did most good by innoculating material from the pustules of infected patients into those in whom he hoped to stimulate immunity. He often related how ill the recipients became, but he did not seem to have any deaths from innoculation. This was of course before Jenner’s work with cow pox and in the later years Drennan practiced this form of vaccination. He also had cases of small pox — ‘I have been kept for some days past in some anxiety with regard to the fate of C. Browne’s child who has been very ill in the small pox of the natural kind and has suffered much both the violence of the disease and even of the remedies necessary in it’.

When the child recovered ‘not a scar remained to deface her beauty which in her mother’s eyes is among the first considerations’. We can see from this report that Drennan had some reservations about his therapy which is again apparent when he talks of another patient whose illness he described as hysterical ‘She is now taking the same medicines with some variety of form, she before tried without success, and I am really apprehensive that she will die of the disease or of the Doctor’. He had another patient ‘who in a fit of despair, cut his throat . . . I found him nearly dead on the floor, with great loss of blood, and most frightful wound which we got stitched up, and instead of finding himself out of this life in a moment, he has been lingering a sort of living death ever since’.

This must not have been Drennan’s only case of trauma as it was a very violent time. Drennan on one occasion wrote to his sister asking her to purchase a sword stick for him as ‘I am rather out of town and often out late at night’. Duelling was also common in Ireland and Drennan did not escape. As a result of some unintended trivial insult Drennan felt obliged to issue a challenge and he met his adversary at 8 o’clock the next morning. However, after much discussion in the field, honour was achieved by both sides without a shot being fired.

There were two other doctors in Newry when Drennan arrived — one left shortly after this but the other, — a Dr Templeton — was Drennan’s main competition and

in fact was a constant irritation to him. Drennan's first disappointment was that Templeton did not call and welcome him to Newry — perhaps a portent of things to come, but led Drennan to believe that Templeton 'has no great confidence in his knowledge of the proper business of a Physician and whose manners from all accounts, would be very irreconcilable with the suppleness and insinuation necessary to Dublin practice'. Drennan and Templeton were soon to upset each other by Drennan being asked as a second opinion on a patient. He asked Templeton to attend, but he did not do so and Drennan gave his own directions. Templeton later followed with his prescription. Drennan remarked 'that it was totally unprecedented for 2 Physicians to attend a patient, each administering medicines which might possibly be counteracting each other, or doubling quantities necessary to be ordered endanger the sacrifice of the patient to the Doctors, if not to the disease'. Drennan suggested that the situation could not continue and suggested that Templeton should consult with him but Templeton 'swore to God he never would'.

Another episode was described by Drennan in another letter. 'Templeton has a sort of spy about here whom he affects to recommend, a young man who has never studied at any University, but practices gratuitously among the lower people who in return puff him off in their best manner — I don't fall out with him which would make me appear to fall into Templeton's manner myself, but assent to little matters without formally consulting with him . . . This young man one Cowan — was at Glasgow when I was there on *General* study, and sat along with me for his Degree of Master of Arts, where I can answer with a safe conscience he did not answer a single question except 2 and in those 2 I prompted him — he got his degree'.

Later we read that Cowan was used by Templeton to try experiments 'that he does not seem to sanction but which might injure the rest of the practitioners — perhaps I am ill-natured, but I smell somewhat of a deep villainy in Templeton'. Drennan, of course took some of Templeton's patients which must have annoyed the latter, but Drennan at least showed some charity when Templeton became ill, remarking that Templeton 'looked extremely ill and feeble and I think will not be a very long liver'. Later Templeton is carried about in his chair — a hard fate for an old man — but harder it would be for a young one — I wish him and his a comfortable livelihood sincerely, provided he and they act with candour'.

Templeton and Cowan were not the only competition Drennan had in Newry — in fact, he complained 'this town abounds with quacks both male and female'. Also 'there are 6 apothecaries shops in the place: the principal 2 are rivals and one of them complains that Dr Templeton having put his son as apprentice to the other, has on that account shewn him unjust partiality'. These men annoyed Drennan by taking the easy cases and leaving the physicians the bad ones or calling them in when the others went wrong.

One other medical attendant's position in the medical hierarchy is best described in Drennan's own words 'I was introduced at Halliday's to a Surgeon Macartney, a decent, sensible lad, who treated me the *Doctor* with all possible respect and deference'. One feels that the humble surgeon knew his position in the presence of the mighty physician and the attitudes of the two parties may not have changed much today, but two hundred years ago the unfortunate surgeon was not a university graduate and usually came from a more humble background.

Drennan's practice in Newry was not very successful and he only averaged an income of about £200 per year. However, he did not like the town nor its inhabitants and decided to move to Dublin in 1789. He does not give any clear reasons for this move and we can only speculate that it was either to move into a more acceptable environment, to increase his medical attainment, or perhaps to involve himself in politics. He had always had an interest in politics and at one stage considered going to America to fight in the American War of Independence. The American War of Independence had a profound affect upon politics in Ireland for several reasons. Firstly, the feeling of the Americans towards British taxation and colonial system was similar to that of the Irish and there was a strong feeling amongst the dissenting protestants of the North to shake themselves from the British crown at this time. Secondly, the garrisoned British soldiers were withdrawn to fight in the American war and there was a considerable risk that if the French were to join in on the American side, as they did, that Ireland might be invaded. The vulnerability of the population of Belfast was increased by an American privateer, The Paul Jones, sailing into Belfast Lough in April, 1778 and capturing a British ship. This greatly increased recruitment into the Volunteer Company which had been formed in Belfast in 1777. The Volunteers were a predominantly protestant organisation and while at first, their role was defensive, it later became very much more political gaining strength from the success of the Americans and also as the result of the French Revolution in 1779. Drennan joined the Volunteers while a medical student in Edinburgh and although he does not appear to have played an active part in the organisation, he was very politically conscious and active. While he was in Newry he wrote many political pamphlets under the pseudonym of Orellana or Irish Helot. It may have been the political activity in the capital which drew Drennan to Dublin, but it also nearly led to his death.

In 1790 Wolfe Tone set up a small club of nine people which included Drennan to study politics and write essays etc. It did not survive very long, but while it existed Tone must have known of Drennan's political views especially as he asked Drennan to join this club. Drennan felt that Ireland should be separated from Great Britain and should become a republic and he also had been encouraged in these views by the American War of Independence and the French Revolution. He had written in 1784 to Matty's husband (Samuel McTier) that he thought a secret brotherhood should be established and consequently it is likely that Wolfe Tone knew of this suggestion of Drennan's. Tone had written a pamphlet on the Emancipation of Roman Catholics which had been widely circulated in the North and appealed strongly to radicals in Belfast. By 1791 the Volunteer movement had begun to change and it had become much more political with many companies being frankly republican. As a consequence of Tone's paper he was invited by a committee from the Second Belfast Company of Volunteers under the Chairmanship of Samuel McTier to come to Belfast in 1791 and this meeting resulted in the formation of the Society of United Irishmen. After his meetings in Belfast Tone travelled back to Dublin where a Dublin Branch was set up under the Presidency of Drennan who wrote the Test or Declaration of the United Irishmen which was signed by the members. He also published a pamphlet 'An Address to the Volunteers of Ireland' which was nearly his undoing because it resulted in him being tried for sedition in 1794. He was acquitted on a point of law — much to the disappointment of some of the jury before whom he was tried, as they being landowners tended to be members of the

protestant ascendancy. After his trial he attended some meetings of the United Irishmen but he did not take a very active part in politics as there was a more violent attitude adopted by the United Irishmen which led to the rebellion of 1798. However, he continued in a passive way to observe all that was going on in politics and to write to Matty about them.

Apart from politics Drennan spent most of his time in Dublin trying to establish himself as an accoucheur. He did not seem to be very successful in this line and in fact never made as much money as he did in Newry, perhaps because of his political activity. While his obstetric practice may not have been extensive it is a great pity that some of his views on this subject were not more widely known. Matty wrote to him in 1793 concerning the setting up of a lying-in-hospital for women in Belfast and in reply Drennan stated that he was opposed to all hospitals as he thought that the puerperal fever which was endemic in them killed more patients than were saved by doctors. He advocated cleanliness and frequent washing with simple water 'the sovereign remedy against all infectious diseases . . . WASH AND BE CLEAN should be the motto over the door of every hospital'. He also thought that the money raised for the hospitals was squandered on servants etc. and would have been better employed if doctors were paid to attend to the women in their own homes. Nevertheless, the Lying-in-Hospital was started in Belfast and Matty was the first Secretary. From small beginnings in Donegall Street, it has gone from strength to strength and today is the Royal Maternity Hospital.

After going to Dublin Drennan met an English school mistress called Sarah Swanwich. They wished to marry but did not have sufficient money to do so until 1800 despite earlier pleas for help by Matty to her mother for funds for her brother. They had seven children only four of whom survived to childhood. The eldest, Thomas was brought up in Belfast by Matty but died suddenly at the age of 11. The third and fourth children both died in their first year and Drennan had a post-mortem examination carried out on the second of these which showed that he had two intussusceptions. The symptoms which preceded the death of both these infants were remarkably similar and perhaps there was a common aetiological factor. Sarah Swanwich, the sixth child married John Andrews of Comber who was land steward to Lord Londonderry at Mount Stewart and the Andrews family still flourishes in the Comber area. John Swanwich the seventh child followed in his father's footsteps and became a doctor and was appointed to the staff of the General Hospital (now the Royal Victoria Hospital) on the death of A.G. Malcolm. He was a well known physician and the fourth President of the Ulster Medical Society in 1865.

As a physician in Dublin, it cannot be said that Drennan was a great success. His income was small, never quite reaching the amount he had made in his better years in Newry. He in fact, only made a couple of hundred pounds per annum when other physicians were making thousands. Why he had so little success we do not know, but there certainly was criticism of his management of some of his relations in the correspondence with his sister. One would have thought his political activity would have increased his practice, but the opposite might well have been the case. It might also have resulted in taking up too much of his time which he should have spent with his patients. Whatever the cause, his income was such that he was constantly impoverished, and as a result when a wealthy cousin died in 1807, a year after his mother, he inherited a considerable fortune and he decided to give up medical

practice and return to Belfast. At first he lived in the centre of Belfast, in what is now Donegall Square, but later he moved out to a small mud walled, thatched cottage which had been occupied by Matty. Many years earlier she had given it the name Cabin Hill and this was the site of the present Preparatory School for Campbell College. In the grounds there is a stone on which the name Drennan is inscribed and it is thought that he sat on this stone when he was composing his poetry.

Little is known of Drennan's domestic life in Belfast as there was no need for him to correspond with his sister and consequently there is no record. He took an interest in two bodies which are important to us today. The first of these was the formation of the Belfast Medical Society which has always been regarded as having taken place in 1806. Drennan is recorded as having been on a Committee of six to look after the affairs of the Society. He did not return to Belfast until the Autumn of 1807 and it is unlikely that he would have been on the Committee had he not been living in Belfast when it was formed. No explanation for this discrepancy has been discovered. The Society ultimately amalgamated with the Belfast Clinical and Pathological Society, which had been founded by A.G. Malcolm, to form the Ulster Medical Society in 1862. Drennan made valuable donations to the Belfast Medical Society and was its third President in 1808.

Soon after his return to Belfast he became deeply interested in the foundation of the Belfast Academical Institution which later became the Royal Belfast Academical Institution or Inst. He was one of the most active members of the Friends of the New Institution, as well as being a member of the Board of Visitors, and he delivered the inaugural address when the school was opened on the 1st February, 1814. In this oration he outlined the history of the formation of the Institution and its further objects. It could not then have been predicted that it was ultimately to give rise to a medical school which later became the Faculty of Medicine of Queen's University.

With John Hancock of Lisburn and John Templeton, a botanist, he started the Belfast Monthly Magazine which was first published in September, 1808. It covered a wide range of subjects concerning the arts, biography, medicine, and politics, and Drennan's style can be found in many of the articles. It continued to be published regularly for six years, the last edition being printed in December, 1814.

Drennan did not practice medicine in Belfast, but he was made a Consulting Physician to the Fever Hospital in 1810 and was recorded as still holding this position in the report of the hospital for 1819. It was an honorary position and did not carry any clinical responsibility. Drennan really lived the life of a gentleman from 1807 till his death in 1820. The precise cause of this is not known, but his son recorded that it was 'from affection, principally of the liver'. He was interred at the New Burying Ground of the Belfast Charitable Society in Clifton Street and the two conditions regarding his funeral which he had made in his will were observed. He had requested that his coffin might be carried by six protestants and six Roman Catholics which showed his ecumenical outlook and his deep desire that Ireland should be a country with a united population without religious or sectarian division. He also desired that the cortège should pause outside the gates of the Academical Institution which showed the interest he had in the college itself and education in general. There can be no more fitting tribute to Drennan's life and work than that written by A.G. Malcolm 'A man of the highest integrity, and splendid talents; not even his enemies could conceal their admiration of his genius and character'.

REFERENCE

- 1 *The Drennan Letters*, Belfast: His Majesty's Stationery Office 1931.

I wish to thank the Director and Staff of the Northern Ireland Public Records Office for access to the Drennan Letters and Miss A. Park for typing the manuscript.